

## **Introduction**

Welcome! The daily readings and exercises that follow are designed to lead the Christian believer into a deepening and life changing encounter with Jesus.

### **Getting started...**

The material is presented according to a daily (Monday through Saturday) schedule. For the greatest impact, participants should attempt to stick to the schedule as much as possible.

### **Grace extended...**

Some may want or need (for a variety of reasons) to take a slower pace. If you find yourself rushing to keep up or unable to integrate the material according to the daily schedule, please find a pace that works for you. (The key is to keep moving forward.)

### **Grace requested...**

Over the coming weeks, many themes will be introduced, developed and integrated. Because some of the material doesn't lend itself to a strict linear presentation, this may at first appear to be a haphazard process. Trust that the overarching picture will emerge as the pieces of the puzzle are put in place.

### **Using this book in community:**

Participants are encouraged to use these devotionals in community. (A community might be just two people, a small group or an entire congregation.) If you're embarking on this journey alone, consider asking a friend to join you.

If using in community, you'll want to create a text group of "Accountability Partner(s)". At the end of each of the daily readings, participants will be prompted to text their Accountability Partner(s) to let them know that they've completed the daily readings and exercises. Being a part of a text group will help keep you on track. (As a practical matter, text groups should be no larger than six people and individuals within the groups should agree upon the time-frames in which texting is allowed. For example, a group might agree that there should be no texting before 9:00 am or after 9:00 pm.)

Participants who are using these devotionals in community should, of course, begin on the agreed upon Monday.

May God bless you as you seek a deeper encounter with him!

## Encountering Jesus

What was it like to have an encounter with Jesus back in the days of his earthly ministry? Reading through the gospels, several patterns emerge:

People who came to challenge Jesus—to trap him—didn't fare too well. Likewise, those who set themselves in opposition to him.

But those who sought Jesus from a place of brokenness found in Jesus a person of deep compassion. Those who came to him in need found the help they were looking for: the sick were healed, the sinful were forgiven, the demon-harassed were set free and the blind received their sight.

The stories of Jesus' compassion and healing power are our stories, not necessarily because our needs are exactly the same (although they may well be), but because the Jesus of these stories is the same Jesus who is available to us today.

We all need an encounter with Jesus—a life-changing (and life long) experience of his compassion, kindness and healing touch. As we take our first steps on this journey, consider the following questions:

### Questions:

- 1) What is your most pressing need?
- 2) What form would you like Jesus' compassion to take in your life?
- 3) If Jesus were to ask you, "What do you want me to do for you?" how would you respond?

To close today's reading, let me suggest the following prayer\*:

### Prayer:

Jesus, I humbly come before you in search of a deeper encounter with you. Bless me with honest faith that I might experience the depths of your compassion and grace. Amen.

\*As with all the suggested prayers, read them first in order to determine whether you can pray them *sincerely*. (You may, of course, put them into your own words.)

[Text your Accountability Partner(s): Finished Monday's Exercises.]

## Come and See

In the first chapter of the gospel of John, a man named Nathanael is told by his brother Philip that he has found the Messiah—a man from Nazareth. Nathanael responds skeptically: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip chooses not to challenge his brother’s skepticism, but simply replies: “Come and see.”

Nathanael, to his credit, does just that.

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he exclaimed:

“Look, a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”

Nathanael asked him, “How do you know me?”

Jesus replied, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.”

Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel!”

Jesus said to him, “Because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” (*NET*)

Nathanael’s skepticism didn’t survive its first encounter with Jesus, and even Jesus seemed a little surprised (and, perhaps, amused) by its rapid collapse. But that’s how it often is with Jesus, just one touch—or one word—heals and transforms.

Perhaps you, like Nathanael, are skeptical of the claims made about Jesus. Or perhaps you’re skeptical that an encounter with Jesus would be transformative in the way you most need and desire it to be. If so, let me invite you to just come and see.

### Questions:

- 1) To what degree are you skeptical that a transformative encounter with Jesus is possible for you?
- 2) What are the roots of your skepticism?

Read through the following prayer and then, if you can pray it sincerely, offer it to Jesus. Or offer the prayer in your own words.

### Prayer:

Jesus, I confess to you my doubt and skepticism. I give you permission to overcome anything that stands in the way of a deeper encounter with you. Amen.

[Text your Accountability Partner(s): Finished Tuesday's Exercises.]\*

\*What's this? See the "Using this book in community"  
section of the introduction (page 5) for an explanation.

## Invitation

In the eleventh chapter of Matthew, Jesus issues this invitation:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke on you and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and my load is not hard to carry.” Matthew 11: 28 - 30 (*NET*)

The yoke to which Jesus refers is a harness for oxen. In the region where Jesus lived and taught, oxen were used in teams, and the yokes were, therefore, “double yokes”. Jesus’ listeners would have understood that when Jesus invited them to “take on his yoke” he was inviting them to work at his side, to share his work with him.

Notice who Jesus invites: Not the energized and carefree, not the strong and victorious, but the weary and burdened.

Are you weary and burdened? Would you like to experience rest for your soul? Jesus invites you to partner with him, to work alongside of him. With Jesus by your side his yoke is “easy to bear and his load is not hard to carry.”

### Questions:

- 1) What burden would you most like Jesus to lift from you?
- 2) What burden, do you suppose, would Jesus most like to lift from you?
- 3) Is there a difference between the burden you’d most like Jesus to lift from you and the burden you suspect he’d most like to lift from you?

### Prayer:

Jesus, I am weary and burdened and my soul longs for the rest you promise. Teach me what it means to share your yoke and to work together with you. I give you permission to lift any burden from me that you desire to lift. Amen.

[Text your Accountability Partner(s): Finished Wednesday’s Exercises.]

## Treasure and Pearls

In the middle of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells two short parables one right after the other. At first glance, the parables appear to be near carbon copies of each other. But, as is almost always the case with Jesus' teachings, a second, deeper look is both revealing and rewarding.

**Matthew 13: 44 - 46** “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure, hidden in a field, that a person found and hid. Then because of joy he went and sold all that he had and bought that field. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. When he found a pearl of great value, he went out and sold everything he had and bought it. (*NET*)

In the first parable, the kingdom of heaven is likened to a treasure. A man, who is not necessarily looking for treasure, discovers it and, recognizing its value, joyfully sells everything he has to possess it. According to Jesus, possessing the kingdom of heaven or knowing God is worth more than anything else we could possibly own.

In the second parable, which, again, appears to be nearly identical to the first, Jesus makes a key change which dramatically alters his message. In both parables, an individual finds something of great value (treasure or fine pearls) and is willing to give up everything to possess it, but whereas in the first parable, the kingdom of heaven is likened to the thing of value, in the second, the kingdom of heaven is likened to the one who searches. In the first, God is the thing of value which is found; in the second, God is the one who searches for the thing of value. What then, in the second parable, is the thing of value for which the kingdom of heaven searches? What are the “fine pearls” which God seeks? What is it that God is willing to give up everything to have? You and me.

According to Jesus, God sees you as a fine pearl worth searching for and worth paying a great price to have. As we continue, we'll see that this is not just something Jesus taught, it's something he lived. Jesus treats even the lowest of the low as if they matter, because to him, they do.

Together, these two simple, yet elegant parables teach that, according to Jesus, God is worth and what we are worth to God. More than this—and we should find this of great encouragement—the second parable teaches that our search for God does not depend on our resources alone. While we search for God, God is not indifferent, he is in active pursuit of that which he values most—us.

As we seek a deeper encounter with Jesus, be comforted by Jesus' own assurance that he is seeking a deeper encounter with us.

**Questions:**

- 1) To what extent do you experience God as something worth giving up everything to possess?
- 2) According to the scriptures, what has God given up to possess you?
- 3) Of what comfort is it to know that God seeks you?

**Prayer:**

Jesus, I want to know you as a treasure that is worth giving up everything to possess, a treasure that is far superior to anything I already have. Please find me as I seek to find you. Bless me with an experience of the blessing that you are. Amen.

[Text your Accountability Partner(s): Finished Thursday's Exercises.]

## **An Encounter with Jesus**

(revisited)

If we compare an encounter with Jesus back in the days of his earthly ministry with the encounter we seek with him today, some things would be different and some would be the same.

The most important thing that would be the same is the person of Jesus himself. The Jesus with whom we seek a deeper encounter is the same Jesus of the Bible, the Jesus filled with compassion, kindness, mercy and healing grace, the Jesus who came to reveal God to us. This means that when we see the Jesus of the Bible displaying compassion, we can count on that same level of compassion being available to us today.

But there are two differences which are significant: The first is a matter of time and space. The second is a matter of who we are as believers.

Regarding the first: In biblical times, an encounter with Jesus required travel. Whether you traveled to Jesus or Jesus traveled to you, an encounter required getting to the right place at the right time. Today, Jesus is with us at all times through the presence of his Holy Spirit. (As an aside, this turns the idea of traveling toward an encounter with Jesus into a metaphor. More on this below.\*)

Regarding the second: While the Jesus we encounter today is the same Jesus of biblical times, believers who approach Jesus today come into his presence as forgiven, justified, adopted, reborn and Spirit-filled sons and daughters of God; we come into Jesus' presence as people who have been transformed by his death and resurrection; we approach someone who has made us into his brothers and sisters. How much more, then, can we be assured of his kindness and compassion?

Over the next several weeks, we'll explore these two themes in greater detail:

- The nature of God
- Who we are in light of all that God has done for us.

### **Questions:**

- 1) What is significant about the Jesus of the Bible being the same Jesus we meet today?
- 2) What advantage do we have as believers when we enter God's presence?



**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus, transform me by the truth—the truth about who you are and the truth about who I am as a result of your love for me. Amen.

\*A note on “traveling toward an encounter with Jesus” as a metaphor: If, back in the days of Jesus’ earthly ministry, we set out to meet him, we would probably spend our travel time in preparation for the encounter. Today, because believers have access to Jesus at all times through the presence of the Holy Spirit, there is no “travel time” of which to speak. While it can be useful to think metaphorically in terms of preparing to meet Jesus, it’s important to remember that we’re already in his presence and that what we’re really about is a deeper encounter with him, a deeper awareness of his presence.

[Text your Accountability Partner(s): Finished Friday’s Exercises.]

## Prayer

God, through his Word, invites and encourages us to pray. For example:

**1 Thessalonians 5: 16 - 18** Always rejoice, constantly pray, in everything give thanks. For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. *(NET)*

**Philippians 4: 6, 7** Do not be anxious about anything. Instead, in every situation, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, tell your requests to God. And the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. *(NET)*

**James 5: 16** So confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great effectiveness. *(NET)*

In prayer, we can make requests (for ourselves and others), ask for relief from our burdens and anxieties, share our thoughts and emotions, confess sin, ask for forgiveness, forgive others, offer up worship, ask for guidance and more.

### Examples of prayer:

"God, I'm really stressed about work right now. Please help me get along better with my co-workers. Help me to find a friend at work. Amen."

"Jesus, my mom's health is getting worse. Please bring her a quick and pain-free recovery. Amen."

"Father God, thank you for bringing my sister safely home. I've been so distressed about her, but you've heard my prayer. I thank you for your faithfulness to me and to my loved ones. Amen."

"Lord Jesus, please forgive me for my thoughtless words. I am so sorry. Thank you for hearing my confession and for your promise to always forgive. I receive your forgiveness. Amen."

While we may pray anytime and for any reason, most will find it helpful to have a little structure surrounding their prayer life. Here's one way prayer can be structured on a weekly basis:

**Monday:** Pray for the people you know who need physical healing.

**Tuesday:** Pray for the people you know who need emotional healing.

**Wednesday:** Pray for salvation and/or spiritual breakthrough for friends and family members who need it.

**Thursday:** Pray for the specific needs of immediate family members and loved ones.

**Friday:** Pray for government and world leaders—that God would grant them wisdom, courage, knowledge of the truth and genuine faith in him.

**Saturday:** Pray for those in any of the daily categories who have the greatest need.

**Sunday:** Ask God to bless and protect your congregation. Pray for its members, its ministries and its leaders. Pray that God would bless, encourage, protect and deliver the persecuted church.

There are, of course, many ways to organize a prayer list, but the above includes many of the most important categories. Thus far, we've been closing each day with prayer. Beginning tomorrow, we'll also include a prompting to pray at the beginning of each day according to the above schedule.

**Questions:**

- 1) How often do you pray?
- 2) What keeps you from more constant prayer?
- 3) What category (if any) would you add to the above weekly structure?
- 4) When have you experienced an answer to prayer?

**Concluding Prayer:**

Lord Jesus, you encourage me through your Word to pray constantly and with the assurance that you always hear my prayers. Help me to become a person who enjoys sharing every aspect of my life with you. Amen.

[Text your Accountability Partner(s): Finished Saturday's Exercises.]

**The majority of the biblical quotes are from the New English Translation (*NET*)**

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New English Translation

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